



**State of Wisconsin**  
**Department of Public Instruction**  
Elizabeth Burmaster, State Superintendent

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**\*\*\*\* SPECIAL EDUCATION OP ED \*\*\*\***

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**The time is right to step up for special education students**

*State Superintendent Elizabeth Burmaster*

In our democratic society, we believe that all children are entitled to a quality education. In Wisconsin, we are committed to our New Wisconsin Promise to raise the achievement of all students and to close the achievement gap between economically disadvantaged students, students with disabilities, and their peers. Educators throughout our state are working to provide effective pupil services, special education, and prevention programs to support learning and development for all students while preventing and reducing barriers to student success.

Enter a public school classroom in Wisconsin and you will see quality educators creating multiple options for learning, individualizing instruction based on student needs, and supporting student growth and achievement. Special education is a collaborative process among parents, educators, students, communities, and other agencies to ensure that all children with disabilities have available to them a free, appropriate public education. Our statewide leadership and resources, technical assistance, and innovative initiatives are having positive effects on special education referral rates, increased parental involvement, and higher achievement in reading and math for students with disabilities.

Under the Individuals with Disabilities Education Act (I.D.E.A.) of 1975, the federal government requires a free, appropriate public education for every child with a disability. The law authorized a federal funding level to pay 40 percent of average per pupil expenditures. Today, despite leadership from some members of Wisconsin's Congressional delegation to provide more funds, Congress is providing 18 percent, falling far short of its promise. At the state level, even with our difficult budget situation, Governor Jim Doyle has proposed a \$12 million increase in the amount of state aid that supports special education in the 2005-07 budget.

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Some of our students have severe or multiple disabilities that require very specialized equipment and instruction, which can cost three or more times the average expense of educating a student. These necessary services may include nursing care, a full-time assistant, assistive technology for learning, occupational or physical therapy, and specialized instruction.

That is why two years ago, I announced my “Keeping the Promise Initiative,” which reallocates \$2 million in federal special education discretionary funding to support services for students with high-cost disabilities. My initiative extends additional help by providing special financial assistance for students with disabilities who receive high-cost services. I requested state funding for our “Keeping the Promise: High-Cost Special Education Initiative” in my budget request which Governor Doyle adopted and has proposed \$3.5 million in his biennial budget.

I call on Congress and the Wisconsin State Legislature to follow the lead of the governor and myself to increase aid for special education services and provide special funding for direct services to educate children with high-cost special needs. Some of our schools are cutting back other programs to support necessary and mandated special education services. Far too many communities face the dilemma of pitting special education against regular education because of tightening revenues at the state and local levels as well as broken promises from Washington.

Wisconsin is a national leader in innovative special education programs. Our teachers, parents, and their schools are making a difference in students’ lives. As we innovate and improve our education for all students, the time is right to keep our financial promises. It is our shared responsibility to step up for all children, and especially our students with disabilities who need extra services to achieve to their highest potential.

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*Elizabeth Burmaster is the elected state superintendent of public instruction.*